

Love Your Neighbor as Yourself  
in Early 19<sup>th</sup> Century Russia:  
Based on a Work of  
Mikhail Lermontov and Nikolai Gogol

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I had first heard of Nikolai Gogol (1809-52) *Inspector General*, alternatively called *The Government Inspector* in the Christopher English translation, while watching the PBS series *Wishbone* in the mid 1990s. The little Jack Russell terrier played the role of Ossip and if memory serves me correctly, the moral was not to jump to conclusions. I first heard of Mikhail Lermontov (1814-41) from Professor Mark Steinberg (who incidentally is also the co-writer of our textbook) Teaching Company lecture series *History of Russia: From Peter the Great to Gorbachev* that I borrowed from the library of the community college I transferred from. Therefore I was at least aware of the existence of these stories set in early 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia. Both stories have an undercurrent in them that suggest that the authors are ashamed of their country. Gogol chooses to use comedy to point out the backwardness of Russian society at this time while Lermontov creates a character in Pechorin that mirrors his own feelings about his society. How each author feels about his society is evident by the personality gaps between the characters of different status. In *A Hero of Our Time* this gap is illustrated by how Pechorin thinks about and treats everyone he comes across. In *The Inspector General* Gogol shows the gap, even though it is false, between the imposter Khelstakov and the people of this town that is meant to represent any outmoded town in Russia at that time. It is the degree and multitude of these gaps between individuals and societies that is reflected in these stories that tell so much about Russian society at this time<sup>1</sup>.

One might conclude that it is a given with communication as it was in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century that those outside of the large cosmopolitan cities were a little behind on what was considered the high culture of the day. Russia experienced this as well, but the difference with Russia compared to other European countries was its expanse and that it still had serfdom. So not only were there provincial bumpkins like the townsfolk in *The Inspector General*, but there was a class of people milled around the fields and streets below them. Furthermore, there is a distinction between true Russians and minorities, illustrated well in Lermontov's story as Maxim Maximych repeatedly speaks about Cossacks, Chechens, and Tatars in a derogatory manner. Both of these observations are rather obvious though, it is the way in which people that should be of the same class treat each other that stands out in these stories. The character Maxim Maximych, a Captain in the army, is treated like dirt upon his later chance encounter with Pechorin. Granted, Pechorin is a unique character and we cannot assign class distinction alone for being the reason he is so cold to Capt. Maximych, but the encounter is emblematic of the way an educated young Russian of this age sees himself as being on another level, not just socially, but mentally, than the people around him. In a similar fashion, Khelstakov does his best to play the part of a young higher minded Russian; he not only spews on about how important he is in St. Petersburg as an official in scene VI, but goes on to build himself up as the center of intellectual life, writing plays, cavorting with actresses, and rubbing elbows with Alexander Pushkin.<sup>2</sup> Even before this scene in which he piles lies on top of lies to overwhelm them with his grandeur, the town officials, people who treat the rabble of their own town like dirt, are in absolute awe of someone from St. Petersburg who, in their minds, extends directly from the Tsar.

Each story depicts another type of gap more precisely in society at this period, one I mentioned briefly before and deserves more attention. That gap between the educated young men and their country. This gap in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was very real, and we see this with many of the literary figures of the period, our authors included. These young men were educated

in western ideas and struggled to find reconciliation with these ideas and Russian reality. *A Hero of Our Time* and *The Inspector General* were both popular in their own time because they were believable. Readers and theatergoers realized that these absurd stories could have taken place in their country.<sup>3</sup> These young men characterized in Pechorin especially, do not belong in a country where such stories are possible. They do not belong in the West either, so they are left to wander about or seek to change their Russia. Such young men would be the driving force behind the Decembrist revolt and other movements to reform Russia in this period.

If these series of gaps that I have examined from these works can tell us anything about Russian society in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, I would argue that they tell us about a country in Erik Erikson's Identity vs. Identity crisis stage. It was only a century before that Peter the Great (1672-1725) forced Western Europe onto the ruling class Russians while the majority of the population went about their daily tasks unaffected. So it would be expected that as this western influence trickled down through the nobility to the middle classes it would start to clash with a larger and more diverse segment of the population that would have to adjust. It is in these clashes that young men like Mikhail Lermontov, Nikolai Gogol, and many others of this period would comment. If I had to pick something I've learned about Russian society based on these two writings, then I have learned that these young men felt they had no place in a society where such differences in ideals and realities existed.

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<sup>1</sup>. I had to laugh a little when Prof. Scherer's lecture for 29 Sept. ended with this very point. Nonetheless, I will continue on with this topic.

<sup>2</sup>. Gogol, *Plays and Petersburg Tales*, 286.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher English and Paul Foote's introductions suggest that this is true.

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Bibliography

Gogol, Nikolai. *Plays and Petersburg Tales*. Translated by Christopher English. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Lermontov, Mikhail. *A Hero of Our Time*. Translated by Paul Foote. London: Penguin Classics, 2001.